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WORLD

Newest corporate recruits: carbon-trapping trees

- Two US companies fund 40-year project to restore part of Brazil's Atlantic Forest.

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Special to The Christian Science Monitor

TAGACABA, BRAZIL

Andre Ferretti took a boat down the Tagaçaba River, clambered ashore over mangroves and hiked up a hill that overlooks a spectacular vista of pastures, mountains and the glistening waters of the Atlantic.

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There he and seven other foresters and laborers hacked away the rough grass and planted hundreds of inch-high saplings.

The reconstruction of the Atlantic rain forest, one of the world's most diverse and endangered woodlands, had begun.

The project is a collaboration between Brazilian ecologists, who envision the return of jaguars, red-tailed parrots and other creatures, and US multinationals, who see a public relations victory in bringing back the trees.

The corporate investors also hope to benefit one day from the forest's air-cleaning capabilities.

With \$10 million from General Motors and \$5.4 million from the Ohio-based American Electric Power, the Brazilians are buying 41,500 acres of pasture and deforested hills in southern Brazil.



FUTURE FOREST : In Brazil's Parana state, seedlings are planted for trees that could earn US firms credits for reducing global warming.

PHOTO BY JOHN MAIER, JR.

"It's a real challenge to take a cattle pasture and put a forest on it," says Joe Keenan, one of the program's coordinators.

Less than 8 percent of the original Atlantic Forest remains. For centuries, since Portuguese explorers began cutting down deep-red Brazilwood trees shortly after their arrival in 1500, grass has been growing in areas once sylvan areas. Here in what is now being called the Itaquí Reserve, the forest was cleared in the 1970s when local government offered landowners tax breaks to raise Asian water buffalo.

Now the land belongs to the Sociedade de Pesquisa em Vida Selvagem e Educação Ambiental (SPVS), a Brazilian non-governmental organization that received the US investment through its partner, The Nature Conservancy, based in Virginia. SPVS had

tried to organize restoration projects before but, unable to afford the huge tracts of land required, aborted the projects.

In funding the land purchase and restoration program, GM and American Electric Power have an eye toward supplementing reductions in carbon-dioxide emissions they are making in their core businesses. Trees remove carbon dioxide from the air through a process known as carbon sequestration.

Proposals to combat global warming have included a variety of provisions to help countries meet emissions targets. One approach is to give countries and companies credit for cutting emissions if they pay for reforestation projects or projects that help developing countries adopt energy-efficient technologies or build less carbon-intensive power plants.

Such projects potentially could be worth big money. Firms could opt to plant trees overseas instead of install expensive pollution control equipment at home. And if they use such projects to beat their emissions targets, they could sell their "excess" emissions credits on national and international carbon exchanges to companies having a harder time meeting emissions goals.

In Brazil, where real estate prices are lower than in the US, GM found a good site for the reforestation option.

"It is part of a broader environmental strategy that has other benefits besides carbon credits," says Fred Sciance, manager of GM's global climate issues team.

"We are anxious to demonstrate how effective carbon-sequestration projects can be at ... addressing the atmospheric carbon dioxide issue while also producing a number of co-benefits for the environment."

The two companies are taking a gamble because, with the carbon market idea still at an early stage, there is no guarantee that they will get any return on their investment. Nevertheless, the creation of such programs is crucial because if successful, they could show how preserving a forest or a water table can be economically as well as environmentally beneficial, says Michael Jenkins, the executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Forest Trends.

"We have to create a market so that things like biodiversity conservation and watershed conservation and climate mitigation are things that are just as valuable as wood cut down and chopped up," Jenkins says. "Right now that's not the case, but that's where we are going, and that's what is exciting about the potential of the carbon market."

By giving the money up front and committing themselves to the project for 40 years, GM and American Electric are enabling SPVS to properly plan, carry out, and monitor the restoration. For forester Ferretti, the task is daunting. The remaining part of the original forest has more than 200 species of trees per hectare. He is now determining where and when to plant pioneer species, where to collect seeds, and how to work the seeds so they germinate.

Conservationists north and south of the equator hope the project will bear enough fruit to convince others to sponsor similar ventures. "This is more than buying a chunk of forest," says Keenan. "It is a challenge."